Called
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Psalm 103:1–14
1 Samuel 3:1–10
Mark 1:14–20

“Here I am, for you called me.”
1 Samuel 3:8 (NRSV)

I don’t know who or what put the question. I don’t know when it was put. I don’t even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone or Something and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self-surrender, had a goal.

Dag Hammarskjöld
Markings

Startle us, O God, with your truth, and into the noisy, busyness of our lives, speak the word you have for us today, that hearing we may believe and believing trust and follow your Son, our Lord, your Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I confess I have had a lifelong aversion to declaring that I have been singled out by God. I remember being terrified at the prospect of having to say publically that I believed God had called me to be a minister. That is quite a thing to say, after all. People often want to know how we get into this business. The question comes persistently over the years: “Just how did you decide to be a minister? How did you know?” The assumption is that something must have happened. There must have been a singular experience: a voice, perhaps, in the middle of the night, an emotional upheaval, a vision. There are stories like that, of course: Martin Luther himself, caught in a ferocious thunderstorm, terrified and promising God that if he survived he would enter a monastery. There are plenty of stories like that from famous clergypersons. A variation on the theme is Steve Jobs, who, when he learned of his cancer diagnosis, said that “sometimes life hits you over the head with a brick.” “The experience is clarifying when you learn you are going to die,” Jobs said. “All the unimportant stuff falls away, and you know what you are supposed to do.”

I knew people who could tell in great detail the story of their call by God. I confess I envied them; I confess that nothing like that happened to me.

When I decided, on the advice of a college professor, to take a post-graduate year at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago to study and read and pursue the big questions I was asking about life and meaning, because, as he said, I would never have the opportunity again. I was not sure where it would lead—teaching most likely. “Divinity school?” I objected. “That’s like seminary, isn’t it? I don’t want to be a minister.” “Oh, don’t worry about that,” he said. “They don’t care about that at the divinity school,” which turned out not to be exactly true. The University of Chicago and Chicago Theological Seminary made it possible financially, so we packed all our belongings in our 1957 Ford and drove to Chicago.

In the meantime there was the matter of vocation, doing something with my life—earning a living, to put it as simply as possible. Our minister at the time got word of what I was up to and contacted me. “I know you don’t want to be a minister,” he said. “But on the remote, outside chance that you might someday change your mind, I think you ought to come under care of Presbytery.” I had no idea what that meant, but it sounded like a slippery slope. He assured me that it was no big deal. “We’ll just take you to a meeting of the Presbytery—the ministers and elders of the Presbyterian church in the area—and we’ll ask you some questions and vote and take you under care, and then if you change your mind some day, you will, at least, be on the way to ordination. So I did it. I liked him a lot. He was smart, a World War II veteran, wounded in the Battle of the Bulge and had made a battlefield decision to be a minister if he survived, a Yale graduate, and he ruffled feathers in our church by suggesting that Christianity had something to do with politics, economics, and racial justice. So in the spring of my senior year I went to a meeting of the Huntington Presbytery, in a small church in the mountains of western Pennsylvania. Snow Shoe was the name of the town, I recall. To say I was uncomfortable would be a gross understatement. I put on my only suit and tie, and I stood up in front of a group of dignified men in dark suits (and in those days they were all men). And the first question they asked me was this: “John, do you, as far as you know in your own heart, believe yourself to be called to the office of Christian ministry?” I got the old Book of Common Worship out and looked it up and that is exactly the question. I knew it was coming. Mr. VanDine, my minister, told me. “I can’t say that,” I said. “Pay attention to the phrase in there, ‘as far as you know your own heart,’” he explained. “There’s a lot of latitude there.” So for some reason that was not at all clear at the time, I said, “Yes.”

And so, for all of that, I love the story of Samuel and Eli and the voice in the dark. It’s an old story about an old couple who, after waiting for years, have a child and name him Samuel. They take him to the local shrine and

dedicate him to God and essentially give him to the old priest, Eli, to help out at the shrine. As the story begins, Eli and Samuel are asleep, Eli in his room, Samuel in the sanctuary. A voice calls out of the dark, “Samuel, Samuel.” Samuel thinks it’s Eli calling, runs to Eli, and says, “Here I am; you called me.” “No, I didn’t call you; go back to sleep.” Parents understand this story. You’re fast asleep and suddenly you’re awake. You’re not alone: a child is standing beside your bed looking at you. “I can’t sleep, Daddy.” “Go back to bed. Get a drink of water and go to sleep.”

“Shut your eyes and go back to sleep, Samuel,” old Eli says. And it happens a second time and then a third time: the voice, “Samuel, Samuel,” and Samuel getting out of bed and going to Eli, who is not having a good night’s sleep. And this time Eli, out of patience and not wanting to be disturbed again says, “Samuel, if it happens again, say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Sure enough, the voice comes again and Samuel says,” Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.” And the Lord speaks and tells Samuel that he is going to play a role in a major project God is about to initiate.

I love that story because, for one thing, the voice of God was not immediately recognizable as the voice of God. Samuel thought it was Eli calling him. It wasn’t until Eli nudged him that Samuel even entertained the notion that he was being called by God. So maybe the voice of God is not always immediately identifiable. Maybe the voice of God sounds like a human voice. Maybe the voice of God *is* a human voice saying “Let’s go to a meeting in Snow Shoe, Pennsylvania.” Maybe God employs human voices to communicate. Maybe the God whose Word became flesh, according to the Gospel of John, uses human beings to get the work done and the Word spoken. And so maybe if you want to know what God is saying you shouldn’t be waiting for the sky to break open and a voice to come to you out of the blue. Maybe you should listen carefully to the voices that speak to you; listen carefully to the voices of your friends, your spouse, your partner, your mentor, your colleagues, your child. Listen, Frederick Buechner says, to your life, listen to your own heart, because that is how and where God summons us.

I love this story because even after Samuel recognizes the voice as God’s voice, there isn’t a lot of detailed instruction. Mostly it’s a “head’s up” that there will be a need to move, to be nimble, flexible, not dug in, unmovable; in Samuel’s case he will leave Eli and join another family. Samuel didn’t get a fully developed, detailed life plan. What he got was notice that God cared about him, knew him by name and had work for him to do, that God had something to say and would get back to him. What God is doing here, I think, is starting a lifelong conversation that will continue as long as Samuel lives.

Fast forward centuries later: One day, just as his own story is beginning, Jesus is walking beside the Sea of Galilee. He sees two fishermen, Simon and Andrew, working at their trade. “Follow me and I will make you fish for people,” he says. And, of all things, that is what they do: leave their nets and follow. They come upon another boat. It belongs to an old fisherman, Zebedee. He and his sons, James and John, are repairing their fishing nets. “Follow me,” he says, and they leave their nets, boat, and astonished father, and follow him.

New Testament scholars have always puzzled over it. Surely, it couldn’t have happened just like that. Surely Simon, Peter, Andrew, James and John must have known him, known about him. Surely there was something more. If there was, none of the Gospel writers thought it was important. What was important was that he called them, chose them, called them by name, and they dropped what they were doing. There was no “Orientation to Discipleship” class, no study period, no courses in theology and history, no communication workshops, just Jesus’ call and their response. They would learn what they needed to know as they followed, not as they thought about following. And it has always intrigued me—and intrigues me now more than ever—that he did not ask them about what they believed. There is no mention of doctrine or dogma or morality issues. That will all come later. All there is here is the summons and response.

I’ve read it and thought about it hundreds, maybe thousands, of times, and it still startles me. I love Presbyterianism precisely because, from the beginning, it has emphasized the life of the mind. John Calvin, our founder, was the towering intellect of his day. Down through the centuries, the Presbyterian tradition has produced some of the most distinguished theologians and theologies. The notion that ordination should be preceded by rigorous academic discipline is our idea. The idea that a sermon is, at least in part, an intellectual exercise, came from us. Wherever Presbyterians went—North America and throughout the world—we established schools, colleges, universities. We like to think of ourselves as thinking Christians, and it is one of the things I love most about Presbyterianism. And so I continue to be surprised, stopped in my tracks, by this first New Testament story about following Jesus: that there is no theological admissions exam to discipleship, no morality training, nothing except a willingness and the courage, the faith, to follow Jesus.

And I love remembering that those first followers were not perfect, that they would stumble—a lot—along the way. They are never quite sure who he is or what exactly he wants of them. When one day he asked them directly who they thought he was, Peter answered for them—“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”—and almost immediately shows that he doesn’t even understand his own words and so irritates Jesus that he says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan.” They will try pathetically to keep the

children away from him; they will argue that they don't have enough food to feed the crowds; they will argue with one another about who among them is the brightest and best; and in a display of surprising hubris, two of them will ask him point blank to elevate them over the rest. And near the end, Peter, their spokesperson, will shame himself when the chips are down and Jesus is under arrest and being interrogated and tortured and he, Peter, is recognized as a follower and then denies, three times—finally with a curse—that he ever knew Jesus. At the very end, they will all, every one of them, flee for their lives as he dies, alone, on the cross. To follow Jesus does not mean never stumbling, never failing, never betraying or sinning, never disappointing him or yourself.

To be a Christian is to follow him as best you can, where you are: not to believe ideas about him, not to subscribe to the most orthodox creeds or even to belong to the one holy and true church. It is to follow Jesus, to walk behind and go wherever he goes.

I have known many people over the years who told me that they could not join the church or call themselves Christian because they had trouble with this or that belief, doctrine, rule, or regulation or, today, because they are appalled at the way Christianity is portrayed in the press—exclusive, judgmental, mean—or the way politicians tout right-wing social issues as definitive, final biblical and Christian values, which they simply are not. The truth is Jesus said simply "Follow me." Of course it matters what you believe. Of course it matters whether you are guided by him as you come to your own conclusions about what is right and moral and true in regard to the challenging moral questions of our day. But it is secondary. What comes first is his summons and your, our, willingness to follow.

We believe that God calls not just a few, but everyone; that God has work for everyone to do. Not just clergy. That's a very old and very bad idea—that God calls men and women to ministry but leaves everyone else to their own devices and preferences. It was Martin Luther who first said that no livelihood is dearer to God than any other. God, Luther said, calls each of us to the vocation of loving God and loving our neighbors. For some of us it means becoming a clergyperson. For others it means the law or medicine or business or teaching or farming or politics. For some it means music, art, construction, bus driving, street cleaning, plumbing, or floor mopping, and for many it is forming a human being by loving and steadfast parenting. For some a job is the way to pay the rent so as to be free to practice a true vocation.

God, I believe, comes into daily life and calls us to follow, to be faithful, to live to our fullest, to love and give our lives away, not just once, but every day. The summons to follow comes every day, in one way or another, we answer.

And then something amazing happens: in the process of following, you begin to know. On the journey you begin to understand. You begin to know who Jesus Christ is as you are on the road, following him. And it begins when, one day, in some way or another, we say yes to him and get up from where we are, mending our nets, doing whatever we are doing, and follow him. He calls. He summons. He comes to us, into the busy, sometimes chaos of our lives, and says simply “follow me.”

It began for me, years ago, with a pretty wobbly yes to a question I was not prepared at the time to fully answer.

I was reminded of that this week when I presided at the memorial Service for a member of this congregation, a quietly faithful man. I also presided at his wedding twenty years ago. He was sixty at the time, never married. She was about forty. So I asked him, only partially in jest, “You’ve been single for sixty years. Why in the world do you want to get married now?” His answer, frankly, wasn’t very articulate. In fact, it wasn’t much of an answer at all. He couldn’t come up with a simple answer why he wanted to do this, to marry this woman. So I changed the subject and, bless her heart, she married him anyhow.

They had a good twenty years, a good marriage. He was diagnosed a little more than a year ago with a very serious condition, for which there was no medical remedy. He declined, slowly but steadily, but carried on and, with great effort, made his way to the front after church just a few weeks ago to greet me, to say good-bye, we both knew probably for the last time. His wife told me the most remarkable thing as we planned his memorial service. Just a few days before he died he said, “Remember when the minister asked me why I wanted to marry you twenty years ago and I didn’t come up with a very good answer? I’d like to tell him that, now, I know why.”

It began for me with a wobbly yes. Fifty-three years later, I know.

Amen.